

The 21st Fox

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Summary: The odd swordfox had all his comrades wondering

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A/N: Longtime readers of my Urthblood stories know much was made of how that Badger Lord's elite swordfox brigade always numbered exactly twenty - no more, no less. This is the story of the 21st fox of that brigade - the one who never made it down from the Northlands to Redwall.

(The character of Mykola belongs to my good friend Samadhir)

Machus had seldom in his life been more furious.

"YOU ... DIDN'T ... USE ... YOUR ... SWORD!"

It was most unlike the fox commander to get physical with the members of his squad, but now in his wrath he shoved Py with both paws, hard, sending the other fox backward to land on his tail on the hard ground. Machus stood glaring down at the fallen creature as others of the brigade looked on in alarm, if not entirely in disagreement.

Py stared up at Machus, his unnaturally large eyes wide with alarm. Those eyes had often left his companions wondering whether he suffered from some physical condition, just as his slightly more pointed features led to debates over whether he might be some subspecies of fox different from the rest of this swordfox brigade.

"I ... I pulled my weight!" the sprawling fox protested, a tremble in his voice as he confronted the unnerving fury of his chieftain. "I fought alongside the rest of you ... and I took down some of the

enemy ... "

"With a baton!" Machus roared. "A BATON! What were you thinking?! Where did all your training go? You are a SWORDfox, not a common footsoldier!" He reached down and roughly drew Py's blade from its scabbard, waving it in front of his junior subordinate's narrow snout. "Lord Urthblood has gifted us with weapons finer than those borne by any other beasts in his service! He has charged us with a special responsibility ... and your refusal to even draw your blade in battle heaps a level of disrespect on our station that shames us all! Give me one reason, just one reason, why I shouldn't strip you of your uniform and give you to Jaffox right now? Because that's right where you're heading!"

Py's jaw quivered; he'd heard of the barbaric fox who commanded those of their species unqualified to make Machus's elite brigade, and from what he'd gathered, he would fare very poorly there indeed. "I ... I just ... "

"Just what? You just what? Disgraced us all? Do you even WANT to be part of this brigade? Because you certainly didn't show it today!"

A figure with a slight limp inserted itself between Machus and Py. "My Sword ... enough. You've made your displeasure clear. There's nothing else to be gained by berating him further."

"No, Mykola, I'm not sure there's anything to be gained by anything I could say. To not even draw his sword ... under battle conditions ..."

"And yet he did acquit himself well. Nobeast came to harm as a result of his actions, even if he did fall back on his preferred weapon of choice from his time before he joined us. Perhaps he just needs more time and training to grow fully comfortable with his new arms."

"He's had time," Machus growled, still uncharacteristically hot under the collar. "He's had training. Today he faced battle, and he failed to meet even the most basic demands of his duty. These campaigns are ongoing, Mikky, and the next clash could come tomorrow. I can't have a fox in my brigade who's blade-shy. The rest of us deserve better than that. We need to be able to rely on each other - and today, this one proved we can't rely on him."

"Then let me work with him," Mykola pleaded. "One-on-one, on my own time. He may not have used the weapon you would have preferred, but he hardly disgraced himself on the field of battle this day. Give me a few days to help him grow as comfortable with his blade as he is with his club, and then ... well, let's at least give him another chance. I think he's earned at least that much."

"We may not have a few days, Mikky - but I will say this: If he's still in my brigade at the time of our next action, I will personally inspect him to make sure the ONLY weapon he's carrying is his sword ... and he will use it, or he will die."

Mykola nodded. "I understand, Sword."

"Good luck with you then." Machus drove Py's sword point-first into the ground a mere paw's breadth from the recruit's footpaw, spun and

stormed away in the worst temper to grip him that season.

Mykola extended a paw to help Py back to his feet, which the other gratefully accepted with a sheepish smile. "Thanks, Wobbles. I thought I was a goner there."

"Don't call me that," Mykola shot back testily, then immediately softened again. "Why DID you fall back on your baton in today's battle? I know you're still mastering your blade skills, but they're not THAT bad. You could have held your own, I'm sure of it."

Py took a long time in answering. "Because blades kill. And I'd rather not kill if I can incapacitate. It's just the right thing to do."

"The right thing to do? Py, do you realize the kind of creatures we're up against? I hardly embrace slaying myself, but sometimes it has to be done. You were very lucky today, in spite of what you just had to endure from Sword Machus. Your club would never win the day against an experienced bladesbeast, or even a spear-bearer with longer reach than yours. You were lucky you weren't killed - and even luckier that none of the rest of us fell, because Machus WOULD have found a way to turn the blame for that back on you, and then we would have seen an execution this evening."

Py looked at Mykola with wide, fearful eyes, then plucked his sword from the ground with trembling paws and clumsily returned it to its sheath.

Mykola's tone grew more sympathetic - the same tone he so often used when speaking and working with the more problematic vermin troops of Lord Urthblood's army who benefited from his patient ear and understanding attitude. "I don't mean to scare you - although maybe a good scare is what you need right now if you're to make it through this. I've had my share of scares in this uniform, and they've made me the warrior I am today. Now, as to your earlier comment about blades, there ARE ways to wield swords without taking life, so if that's your primary concern, let's work on that first. I'll teach you how to brandish the flat of the blade as an effective bludgeon, and how to stab and slash at arms and legs and paws ... just enough to take an enemy out of the action. If Machus sees you doing at least THAT much in our next battle, he'll not be able to gainsay you. But you MUST learn to rely on your sword as your primary weapon. You'll not last in this brigade if you don't ... and no fox under Machus has ever quit or been discharged from our squad. And I honestly don't know if that would be an option for you either."

Py swallowed, having gathered this very salient fact for himself already. "I ... I know. And I want to succeed and do well, I really do. It's just ... I feel like I'm out of my depth here most of the time. Like I was thrown into the deep end of the pool and expected to swim without being taught how. I'm trying my best to meet everyone's expectations here, but ... but anyway, thanks for offering to do this for me. You're the one fox in this brigade I think even thinks halfway like I do, and you've helped me a lot already. I don't know what I'd do without you, Wob- uh, Mikky."

The lame fox smiled at this near-mistake. "Hey, we all have to work together, don't we? Now let's see if we can get some practice swings in before the daylight gives out. Normally we rest after a battle,

but if Machus sees us working at it right away, he'll know you're serious about this. And that's what we need you to be right now. Come on, let's get started ... "

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Perhaps Py was serious about sharpening his blade skills, and truly did appreciate that his very life could depend upon his attitude now ... but he didn't always show it. Between regular drills with the full squad (where Machus seemed to push him harder now than ever, with a relentless attention that often left the newest recruit with sore muscles and under-the-fur bruises and more than one shallow sword slice) and his extracurricular sessions with Mykola, he still found time to mingle with the other beasts of Urthblood's army - something no other fox of the brigade did, maintaining their aloof superiority and air of heightened discipline. Mykola couldn't tell whether this rankled Machus or gratified him, that even one of their squad might reach out in so companionly a manner to the woodlanders in arms under the red-armored badger's banner. If Mykola spent much of his spare time with the rats and weasels who needed extra help fitting into this army, Py whiled away his free time carousing with the mice and otters and hedgehogs and shrews, sharing jokes and indulging in games of chance which often kept him up well past nightfall, when most of his fellow foxes were in their bedrolls. He seemed to be genuinely trying, as far as Mykola could tell, but there was a carefree spirit within Py that not even his precarious situation within the brigade could entirely quell. It was as if he sought popularity outside where he should have been concentrating his efforts, and Mykola honestly couldn't tell if that was a good thing or not.

On the third night after the confrontation with Machus, Mykola found his erstwhile pupil seated around a table under a tarp with Captains Saybrook and Abellon and some of their other otters and mice, engrossed in a game of cards that Py himself had introduced to the Northlanders, and which had become quite popular in this recent season. Mykola scowled into the lamplight. "Py, it's past lights out! You need to turn in, or you'll be dead on your paws tomorrow!"

"Aw, but I'm winning here!" the other fox protested, making it sound like they were playing for far more than acorns. "Just a couple more hands, Mikky, then I'll hit the hay."

"Aye, let us have a chance to win back some o' what this brushtail's swindled outta us," the otter Olimpo said.

Py put on an affronted look which only served to amuse his fellow gamesbeasts. "Swindled? You wound me! I won my nuts fair and square!"

"Mebbe," Saybrook put in with a wink and a grin, "but seems to me yore still makin' up new rules as ye go along, matey. Someday ye'll hafta write 'em all down so's the rest of us can know 'em as well as you do!"

"Maybe someday I will. Now quit yammering and deal out the next round! I'm on a roll here!"

Mykola stepped fully under the tent and took Py by the arm. "No more rounds. You're on thin ice these days, and you can't take chances

like this!"

Py sighed, sweeping up his acorns to hold them close to his black uniform tunic. "Sorry, fellas, but Mommy says it's bedtime for this foxy. Maybe tomorrow, eh?"

"Yeah, see ya 'round, Py!"

Heading back to the swordfox area of the encampment under the light of the nearly-full moon, Py glimpsed a long-eared form creeping between tents off to their left. "Hey, I think that's the first rabbit I've seen since I got here! Was wondering if there were any bunnies about ... "

Mykola followed his fellow fox's gaze. "Oh, that one? That's a hare, not a rabbit. Can't you tell the difference?"

"Um ... no? Although it is rather dark. Who was that?"

"Just some local. An actor by trade, from what I hear, although apparently he runs some special errands for Lord Urthblood."

"Ah. Maybe we'll get to see him put on a show?"

"Maybe. Py, you've been making decent progress these past few days, but you still have a long way to go. Most of the other foxes can still deprive you of your blade with little effort, which means many foebeasts we're likely to face could probably do the same. And there's still a lot more I need to show you about using your blade non-lethally. You can't be staying up so late like this. You'll need all your strength for your drills, and a clear head to concentrate!"

"Oh, I'll be fine, Wobbles. Don't you worry about me."

Mykola narrowed his eyes at the other fox. "What did I tell you about calling me that?"

"Oh, lighten up! It's not like I mean anything by it ... "

Mykola sniffed. "Just how much ale did you drink tonight?"

"Not enough to make me forget my troubles, alas. But hopefully enough to help me sleep. Now let me just see if I can make it to my blankets without waking any of those other gourches ... "

Mykola saw him to his bedroll, and made sure Py was firmly down in it to stay before lying down himself, shaking his head in consternation.

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The next morning, things came to a head, in the worst possible way.

Py stood staring ashen-faced at Haddican, his sparring partner clutching at his bleeding arm with a grimace of pain. Machus stormed over to the scene. "What happened?!"

"It was ... an accident," Py stammered in a dry throat.

"Tried to go easy on him," Haddican growled. "An' he thanked my efforts by slicing me like a clumsy stoat."

"Okay, that's it. You're done with us." Machus grabbed the sword out of Py's shaking paw, glowering with simmering rage. "I'd take your uniform here and now too, but that would mean I'm expelling you from our brigade, and I'm not letting you off that easily. You're going to Jaffox; let's see if he can make anything better out of you than I can!"

Mykola again tried to intercede on Py's behalf, quelling his own frustration at the junior swordfox's late activities of the night before. "Sword, it was an - "

"Enough, Mykola," Machus cut him off. "Enough of sticking up for him, making excuses for him. He's not fit for our brigade. He never will be."

The lame fox leaned in close to his commander. "Then release him. His heart is good, even if his discipline and skill are lacking. He can help our cause in other ways beside on the battlefield. He'll never last under Jaffox. You know that."

Machus remained resolute. "Then he should have thought of that before trying out for our brigade and making a mess of it. He goes to Jaffox."

"Well ... well, I'll take him there."

"No you won't. Your place is here, practicing with your fellow swordsbeasts. We can spare a rat or a weasel to escort him. It's all he deserves."

Mykola turned a mournful gaze on Py. "I tried. I tried."

"Yes, you did," Py acknowledged with a somber nod. "And I thank you for your help. But it looks like I needed more help than you could give ... "

A weasel named Kara guided the forlorn fox through the woods and over a ridge to where Jaffox kept his own separate force apart from the swordfoxes. Py regarded his mustelid companion with an odd look, as he so often did in the company of that species, but said nothing. Kara didn't question this silence; if he'd been ordered to Jaffox, he'd not have much to say either.

Py gasped as he was shown into the tent where Jaffox sat sprawled upon a seat of spent haversacks; the warrior vulpine was easily twice the size of Machus, and appeared one tenth as civilized. One glance was all it took to show that all the stories about this ruthless fixer must surely have been true.

Jaffox took the note Machus had hastily scrawled to explain the situation and read it over. Then he grinned. Then he read it again, his malicious gaze going from Py to the words on the parchment and back again. "So, not good enough to make the snob brigade, huh?"

"I ... I guess not," Py answered in a tiny, cracked voice; truly, he'd never seen a fox like Jaffox before.

"Then I doubt ye'll be of much use to me either. Ain't you th' one who used 'is club in the last battle 'stead o' yer blade?"

"Um, yes, that was me."

"Heh. Heard 'bout that. Gave us all a good laugh here, that it did. Sorry I missed that battle m'self - that woulda been sumthin' t' see." Jaffox rose from his seat and came out from behind his table to tower over Py. "Now what kinda fox would use a club when he had one o' those fine swords of Lord Urthblood's hangin' at his side?"

"I ... messed up. Fell back on the weapon I was most experienced using, before the brigade."

"A club? Just what kinda gang did you belong to 'fore Lord Urthblood recruited you anyway? An' what's wrong with yer eyes? Y' got some kinda gland problem? Look like a scared kit!"

"Nothing's wrong with them. They're just ... "

"You ever killed a beast, kit?"

Py swallowed. "No. No, I never have."

"Then ye're no use to me. That changes today, one way or another." Jaffox went to one corner of his command tent, grabbed a shovel and thrust it into Py's uncertain paws. "Go outside, near the forest edge, an' dig a grave. Make it a good deep 'un. Should be plenny o' time t' finish the job 'fore the noontide. Then ye're gonna go kill yerself a foebeast. There's still a few left in these woods, so you should be able t' find one without too much trouble. Ye're gonna kill 'im, drag the body back here, and put it in that grave, all 'fore you turn in fer th' night. An' if you can't do even that much, then it'll be yer corpse in that grave. I'll put it there m'self, an' take great pleasure in doin' so an' riddin' these Northlands of a useless pile o' fur. Either way, there's gonna be a body in that grave this night. Yer choice whether it's gonna be yours. Now get t' work."

Left to himself, ignored by the other foxes here aside from the occasional sniggering glance of ridicule, Py chose his spot and got to digging. Contrary to Jaffox's prognostication, the grave wasn't even half-dug by noon, leaving that much less time to fulfill that other half of Jaffox's cruel orders - the half Py knew he'd likely never be able to obey.

Dirty, tired and sweating, and half-blinded by the midday glare, Py didn't even notice the approaching duo until the larger of the two literally blocked out the sun.

"What is a fox wearing the black uniform of my swordfox brigade doing here, digging a grave?"

Paw to brow, Py squinted up to see Mykola standing beside the majestic Badger Lord in his instantly-identifiable red armor. "Oh, uh ... Lord ... " He shot a gaze Mykola's way. "Mikky? What're you doing here?"

"Trying to fix this, if I can."

"Please come up out of that grave," Urthblood rumbled, "so that we may talk."

After an uncertain hesitation, Py set aside the shovel and complied. He'd never before spoken with Urthblood directly, and did his best to stand at respectful attention.

"I am given to understand Sword Machus has ordered you into the service of Commander Jaffox instead." The badger stared at Py with an intent, unwavering look of scrutiny. "You were ... not working out to his satisfaction?"

"N-no, Lord," Py replied, ill at ease under that acute visual inspection. "My sword skills aren't good enough, and ... and, I'm not very good at killing."

"Then why did you even join my forces? Machus's brigade?"

Py scratched nervously at his neck fur. "I ... don't know how to answer that, Lord."

"Any answer will do."

Py finally met the badger's unnerving gaze. "No. No, I don't think it will."

The two locked gazes for a long time. At last Urthblood turned to Mykola. "Stay here. I must go speak with Jaffox." And with that, the badger ambled off.

Alone with his only supporter, Py looked to Mykola. "He's got me digging my own grave, Mikky."

"I gathered that might be the case."

"He says I have to slay someone, and bury them here by tonight, or else he'll kill me and bury me here instead."

Mykola gave a solemn nod. "He'll do it too. I know Jaffox. He'll do it."

"I ... I won't be able to do what he wants. Go out and kill someone in cold blood, just like that. It's just not in me." Py blinked away a tear, ears pinned back. "I don't want to die, Mikky. Not here. Not like this. It's just ... wrong."

"Yes, it would be wrong. But I don't think it's going to happen. I told the other captains, the ones who've gotten to know you. Abellon, Tillamook, Saybrook - the woodlander captains, the ones who usually have nothing to do with us foxes. And they've told Lord Urthblood you're not like other foxes. Not even like me. They know you're a goodbeast, a life not to be cast away so cavalierly. You're exactly the kind of fox Lord Urthblood would value above all others, who befriends easily and harbors no ill will in your heart. You shy from taking life, yet you go into battle without hesitation, proving yourself no coward. These traits are precious, and I cannot believe a place cannot be found for you in our larger aim of taming the Northlands and bringing all creatures together - perhaps a vital place. All we need to do is make Lord Urthblood see this, and ... and I think it will be all right."

Py swallowed. "I hope so. Thank you, Mikky."

"Not Wobbles today?"

Py let a grateful smile slip. "Not today ... and not ever again, if you truly have just saved my life."

Jaffox marched over to the grave, alone and looking supremely unhappy - which was not a pleasant expression to behold on his savage features. "Lord Urthblood wants t' see you ... alone. Kicked me outta my own tent. So make yer words to him count, 'cos if he gives you back to me afterwards, that'll be it fer you, kit."

Sparing a fearful glance at Jaffox and a hopeful one for Mykola, Py marched over to the barbaric fox chieftain's tent and let himself inside.

Urthblood stood behind the strategy table, ignoring the makeshift seat of empty sacks, and wordlessly bade the fox approach. Py went to the table's edge and stood at the best attention he could muster. "Lord?"

"You are not competent to hold any position in Machus's swordfox brigade. How did you end up there?"

"I ... just did."

"Machus vets his recruits most carefully for their skills. And I do too. Only the best of the best make it into his brigade. I do not believe he ever vetted you ... and I know I most certainly did not. In fact, I am quite certain I have never seen you before today. So I ask again, how did you end up in my swordfox brigade?"

"You ... wouldn't believe me."

"You'll find I am capable of believing quite a bit."

Py swallowed. "It just ... happened. I woke up one morning in my bedroll, sword at my side and black uniform laid out alongside me. I put them on, because it seemed like I had to, and when I walked around, everyone seemed to know who I was, like I'd been there all along. I ... I can't explain it any better than that."

"So you never joined?"

The fox slowly shook his head. "No. No, I guess I never did."

"That sounds rather ... improbable."

"I know, but ..." Py shrugged. "That's the way it happened."

"Hmm. But more than just improbable. I look into you, and what I see goes beyond the merely improbable to the impossible. You are an impossible creature."

"I ... didn't know that."

"I see in you things that cannot possibly be. And yet here you are, standing before me now. If you did not join my forces, you must have

come from somewhere else. Where was that?"

Py rubbed nervously at his arm in obvious discomfort. "I'm not sure ... I don't know ... I mean ... um ... "

"Tell me about Zootopia."

Py's eyes widened even more than usual. "You ... know?"

"Just the name. Uppermost in your thoughts. And the glimpses, showing me things I cannot fathom. What is Zootopia?"

"It's ... a city. It's my home."

"And you do not know how you got from there to here?"

"No, Lord. Not a clue."

"What was your name again?"

"Py. A shortened version of my middle name. It seemed to fit ... here."

"Three names? Most unusual."

"Not so unusual where I come from."

"Does Zootopia exist in this time? Where is it? Is it of this world? Is it of the future?"

Py shook his head. "I can't answer any of those things. I just don't know, Lord."

Urthblood regarded the fox for a long time. "I do not sense you to be a spy, or dishonest, or a danger in any traditional sense. And yet, you are a danger."

The fox's hackles rose, and Py felt his heart race even harder. Was this powerful creature about to pass a sentence of death upon him?

"You are a danger, because you present so many uncertainties. You do not belong here, and the circumstances of your presence remain unexplained. If you were to die here, perhaps nothing would happen, and the worlds would march along without disturbance. On the other paw, perhaps your death in a time and place not your own would throw the worlds off balance, and unleash catastrophe. This ... presents a dilemma of a sort I never thought to face."

"Um ... sorry?" Py couldn't think of anything else to say.

"How do you propose we return you to Zootopia?"

"I ... I don't even know how I got here. If I knew how to get back, I would have gone back long before now."

"Then we shall have to safeguard you until we know more, or circumstances provide the answer we need. The Northlands are a harsh and warlike place, as you have seen yourself. I shall shortly be leaving for Mossflower, and Redwall. You will accompany Machus's

brigade, which I had planned to bring with me in any event. Once we reach Redwall, I will officially discharge you from my service, and implore the Abbeybeasts to shelter you there for as long as need dictates. You will be safe in that place, and your safety is paramount now."

Py swallowed in relief. "Thank you, Lord."

"No thanks are necessary. I do this for the sake of the lands. I would also not see any decent and honest creature come to harm unnecessarily, and my captains assure me you are both decent and honest. Perhaps ... perhaps you are my own future. I strive for a time when all creatures live together in peace. From what I see in your thoughts, that is exactly what happens in Zootopia, is it not?"

"More or less, Lord."

"Then you are my hope, Piberius of Zootopia. You are my hope."

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"We're goin' to Redwall? He told you this?"

Py flashed a confident grin to Brot and Olimpo as they sat at the gaming table in the otters' tent; now that he'd won his reprieve from Lord Urthblood - no more having to serve in the swordfox brigade for which he was so poorly suited, no more threat of being executed for incompetence and uselessness by the cruel Jaffox, and no more obligations of any other sort that he could discern - he was free to stay up as late as his mouse and otter and hedgehog friends cared to stay awake themselves, with no fears of a prolonged round of cards affecting his drilling performance the next morning. Now, at the mention of a trip to Redwall, the enlisted fighters perked up even as Saybrook and Tillamook shot reproachful looks the fox's way.

"That doesn't leave this tent," the otter captain warned. "Lord Urthblood's only briefed us captains so far. Doesn't want word gettin' out that a large portion of the forces who've tamed most of the Northlands are leaving, worried it might embolden any vermin who are still up here an' may cause trouble. We sit tight until we move, and then we move fast."

The fox sat unworried at this reprimand. "Well, from the way that badger was speaking, Brot and Olimpo here won't need to keep mum very long. Lord Urthblood made it sound like we'd be moving pretty soon, maybe even tomorrow or the next day. He seemed in a pretty big hurry, so don't plan on putting down roots here for long!"

"Wonder what's got him all fired up all of a sudden?" Tillamook wondered. "Did 'ee say, Py?"

"Um ... not specifically. So, this Redwall that I keep hearing about ... what's it like? Seems like everyone's eyes light up at the mere mention of that place."

"Oh, none of us've ever been there, matey," Saybrook told the fox. "'Tis a place of legend, widely known through all the lands, a haven of goodbeasts an' good will an' good food an' good beds an' warm

hospitality an' ev'rything else a soul could ask for t' find peace an' comfort. An' any goodbeast would give its left ear to spend a spell there, an' p'raps both ears to make it more'n a spell. So in a way, after all th' hardships we've had to endure in these Northlands campaigns, this's the best news most of us coulda heard. Why, just bein' in Mossflower will be like havin' a vacation!"

Py smiled. "Yes, that does sound nice. Although from what I gather, they don't normally host foxes there, do they?"

Saybrook flashed Py an encouraging grin. "I'll wager they'll make an exception for you, Py matey. Oh, an' speakin' o' wagers ... " The otter laid his cards out on the table. "Straight-tail flush, unless I'm mistaken!"

Py was about to point out that Saybrook was actually one card short of his self-declared flush, but then thought better of it. He'd been accused enough times of adjusting the rules of poker on the fly to benefit himself, so this time he'd hold his tongue and let one of his fellow players garner the acorns. After all, they wouldn't even know about poker if he hadn't introduced it to this world.

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"Attack! Attack! We're under attack!"

Py jolted awake through recently-ingrained training, and older training which was not as militaristic but just as deeply ingrained. Pulling on his tunic automatically in a single fluid motion and buckling his belt, he grabbed for his baton - the only weapon he bore these days, since his expulsion from the swordfox brigade - and jumped to his feet, ready to join Urthblood's Northlanders in repelling whatever assault was being mounted against their camp.

At first he couldn't make heads or tails in the dawn gloom of which direction the attack was coming from or where he ought to be running, but upon spotting Captain Saybrook he fell into step alongside the otter to go where he could be best used.

Saybrook ground to a halt and spun to face the fox. "Back to yore tent, Py! Ye ain't to be part of anymore engagements, Lord Urthblood's orders! Not sure what you told him the other day, but yore to be kept say an' outta harm's way, so - "

It was at that moment that the enemy arrow sailed right past Saybrook and thudded squarely into Py's chest.

Py gasped, eyes wide, and fell straight back, knowing that in this land, with its lack of hospitals and modern medical technology, he'd just been slain.

"Aw, fishrot an' bilge crud!" Saybrook swore, kneeling down alongside the sputtering Py and shielding the fox with his body as much as he could, for all that it mattered now. He grasped Py's spasming paw in his own webbed one, willing for the fox to remain alive against all odds. Py gazed up at the otter with eyes already beginning to droop, this mad world of swordfoxes and Northland campaigns and grim prophetic Badger Lords and brutal barbarians and dawn ambushes receding from him.

"Hold on, Py matey! I'll go get Mona - that vixen c'n heal anybeast, an' any body! You just hold on tight, I'll fetch her right to ye!"

And then there was another figure at his side, taking his paw from Saybrook even as the otter raced away for help. Py forced his scattering thoughts back together one last time to see Mykola gazing down at him with distraught face and tear-filled eyes. "Py! Py, don't leave us! You can't leave us now, like this! Not after ... after ..."

Py smiled with the acceptance of the inevitable. "Guess ... I won't ... get ... to see Redwall ... after all ... will I?"

Then his eyes closed and he was gone from the world where he never belonged.

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"Nick! Nick! Oh my god, you've been shot, Nick!"

Nicholas Piberius Wilde felt like he'd been suddenly jolted awake for the second time in quick succession, only this time not by shouts of an enemy sneak attack upon a medieval encampment. Looking up from where he lay on his back against a very cold hard floor, he saw Judy leaning over him, eyes wide and frantic with panic. A sharp pain in his side let him know this was no arrow straight into his heart, but something lower down and off-center. Memory came flooding back to him, memory of the case he and Judy were investigating ... a case involving illegal fish smuggling, and the leads which had led them to Tundratown's seedier side, a district even Mr. Big never bothered with.

He remembered the raid and catching the smugglers by surprise, and the criminals fighting back with the only weapons they had immediately at paw.

Spear guns.

Nick gazed down, saw his right paw clutched tightly around the base of the spear protruding from his abdomen there, a red spot already staining his blue police uniform and spreading outward.

Somehow, it didn't seem as bad as that other place.

"Don't pull it out, Nick!" Judy implored, misinterpreting his intent with the placement of his paw. "Don't pull it out, or you'll bleed out! We've got to keep it in, until the ambulance arrives!"

"Yeah," Nick groaned; he'd had the same basic medical training at the Police Academy that Judy had. "I know the drill, Carrots."

"Hang on, Nick." The rabbit's voice was cracking now, the barely controlled emotion of a police officer realizing her partner and friend was grievously wounded and in serious danger. "You just hang on, Nick. Help's on the way. You're gonna be all right. It's gonna be all right. Just hold on."

Nick smiled through the pain. "Don't freak out on me, Peaches. You

can't get rid of me that easily. So, did we get 'em?"

Judy forced an aggrieved smile. "Yeah. We got 'em, Nick. We got 'em." Behind her, he saw several of their fellow officers standing back and looking on with concern, and in the distance heard a wailing siren growing louder. The ambulance was almost here.

"Good. Maybe we'll get a promotion out of this."

"Maybe we will. Just stay with me, Nick. It's going to be all right."

It flashed through Nick's mind what kind of damage such a spear would have done to his smaller partner, especially if it had caught Judy more squarely on-center, and he quailed at the thought. Things worked out much better here than they could have.

"I know it will. I'm with you, Judy, and I'm not going anywhere." He closed his eyes and allowed himself to drift away from the pain for the moment, secure in the knowledge that here, unlike the other place, things really would be all right.

End
file.